

Rail will prove the only answer down the track

March 30, 2005

City transport needs imaginative funding, writes Peter Newman.

Cities have to be constantly renewed and revitalised. Many older industrial areas and inner area sites have been renewed and most people can see that they are better. To allow areas to decline is to deny the possibility of new opportunities for younger people, and opportunities for new infrastructure and services.

Sydney needs this new development in centres and along some corridors. Centres provide amenity, services and jobs, especially knowledge economy jobs. Many centres, such as Parramatta, have grown rapidly into genuinely urban centres with a full range of services. However, many are inadequate: they do not have the population and jobs to make them a viable provider of amenities.

So, directing development to these centres will create many advantages, such as improving services in the centres and avoiding too much change in suburban areas. Much of this new development is high density; on the fringe it is essentially low density. This is the growth phase Sydney is in.

I hope there is plenty of opportunity for medium density as well - perhaps along the middle suburb revitalisation corridors - as this is a speciality of Sydney. Areas such as Paddington are world-class examples of how to build such areas.

Infrastructure has not kept pace with redevelopment in the past decade. The pressure to move back into the city and centres is driven by the market, as explained by the Marchetti principle: people do not like to spend more than one hour a day travelling - anywhere. Moving to shorten travel times has been a feature of Sydney, which is at the Marchetti limit in many areas. Not all infrastructure is stretched, but trains, buses and roads are all at capacity.

The transport problem is due to a lack of vision and a funding model. This is not the problem for road planners, who have a clear idea of what is needed and a funding model developed over the past decade which allows the government to earn money with each project. Such a combination is unstoppable. We have had a decade of tollways and tunnels with \$10 billion spent on increasing the speed of traffic. It has worked. For a while.

The road system will always fill up again after about five to 10 years and reduce traffic speeds to what they were. This is because of induced traffic - people move away from other modes and travel further if the new road is faster. The M4 had an induced traffic component of about 20 per cent.

Roads are also limited by their sheer physical capacity. A road lane can carry about 2500 people an hour; a busway about double that - a level now reached and even exceeded on the busways in the city centre. Light rail can carry between 7000 and 10,000 people

an hour - which is why this must eventually replace the congested bus services along many corridors - while heavy rail can carry 50,000 people per hour, 20 times the capacity of a roadway.

This explains why most big cities have a rail system at their base. The 200,000 people who come into Sydney by train each working day would need 65 freeway lanes and 782 hectares of car parks if they travelled by car .

We need a decade of rail building in Sydney. We seem to be stuck in our thinking about what is needed and what is a relevant funding model.

Such a model could include two new mechanisms. One would be based on tollway funding for fast heavy rail. People will leave their cars if you provide a faster alternative, and they will pay for it. Development will be concentrated at the centres that it links. This is the attraction of the western fast rail proposal: it has suggested a new funding mechanism that so far has only been seen to be relevant to tollways. It links the city with Parramatta and Penrith. A coastal fast rail will also be needed to help shape that sprawling growth.

The other funding mechanism would be based on the capture of land development value along corridors served by light rail. This can make rail pay.

A decade of rail development is not a soft option: it is the only alternative if we are to make a liveable and sustainable city. It is essential if we are to direct growth into centres, revitalise corridors and make the city centre work.

I remain hopeful that the Sydney Metropolitan Strategy can deliver this.

Peter Newman is the NSW sustainability commissioner. This is an edited version of an address given to the Fabian Society.